



LITTLE KNOWN BOYHOOD ADVENTURES OF  
**ABRAHAM LINCOLN**



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# Little Known Boyhood Adventures of Abraham Lincoln

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## The Hoosier Youth



THE stories of Abraham Lincoln's humble birth and childhood in Kentucky, his experiences as a prairie lawyer in Illinois, his freeing of the slaves and the saving of the Union are episodes in his life well known to every American youth. The adventures of Lincoln during his boyhood days in Indiana where he spent fourteen years, one quarter of his whole life, have not been emphasized despite their intense interest and very great importance in his life's story. When Lincoln arrived in Indiana from Kentucky, he was a small lad but seven years old; when he drove his father's oxen, hitched to a covered wagon, from Indiana to Illinois, at the time of the family migration, he had reached the age of twenty-one and was six feet four inches tall.

A friend who knew Lincoln well talked with him about his early life in Indiana and claimed, "There was nothing sad nor pinched, and nothing of want, and no allusions to want, in any part of it. Lincoln's own description of his youth was that of a joyous, happy boyhood." If we would know the story of Abraham Lincoln we must not omit the little known boyhood adventures in the Hoosier State.



The birthday of Abraham Lincoln falls within the Boy Scout Anniversary Week observed annually in recognition of the establishment of the movement in America. On the cover of the *Scout Handbook* there once appeared an embossed profile of Lincoln. In the chapter on "Citizencraft" there was a part of Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address with this comment

about him: "great hearted, humble as the log cabin of his birth, majestic in his simplicity, universal in his sympathy." The life of this national hero should make a tremendous appeal to every American boy. Each year on February 12, thousands of Scouts make pilgrimages to Lincoln shrines and pay tribute to the memory of the martyred President.

Although Abraham Lincoln was born one hundred years before the origin of the Boy Scout movement, his boyhood home offered an ideal environment for his advancement in those objectives now encouraged by merit badge recognition. There cannot be found among our American heroes one who in boyhood and manhood measured up to the Twelve Scout Laws to a greater degree of perfection than Lincoln. It is his living out in every detail the objectives of the Scout Oath, however, that especially commends him to the American boy. He was throughout life "physically strong, mentally awake, and morally straight."

## **"Physically Strong"**

**L**OG cabin homes in the forests which stood on buffalo trails and later on Indian warpaths were ideal dwelling places for a boy's paradise. In describing the playground of his early days Lincoln said, "It was a wild region with many bears and other wild animals still in the woods." The outdoor environment and the tasks of the pioneer combined to give boys on the frontiers rugged frames, heavily muscled.

It is not strange that Abraham Lincoln built up a strong body, since he started as a very small boy to wield an ax in the great forest. Here is his own story about his beginning as a railsplitter. He said his father "settled in an unbroken forest, and the clearing away of surplus wood was the great task ahead." He continued that although he was only eight, he was



large for his age and had an ax put into his hands at once; and from that time till within his twenty-third year he was almost constantly handling that most useful instrument.

Athletically, Lincoln might be called the All-American President. He was the strongest, the tallest, and the most successful in athletic competition of all of our Chief Executives. Undoubtedly inspired by the stories of Washington's youthful activities as a boy, Lincoln became the community champion in all those contests wherein a boy desires to excel.

To be strong was a necessary qualification of an athlete in the wilderness, as most of the competitive contests were based on strength, skill having little to do with the primitive sports of that day. Throwing a mall or heavy mallet backward over one's head or tossing a heavy crowbar called for more strength but less skill than the hammer throw or javelin contests in modern sports. Driving an ax head into a stump was an event in which Lincoln especially excelled. William Wood, a neighbor of the Lincolns said, "Abraham Lincoln could sink an ax deeper into wood than any man I ever saw."

As might be expected, lifting heavy weights was another outstanding pioneer contest. There are many remarkable stories told about Lincoln's great strength. Mr. Richardson, a neighbor, recalled that on one occasion he saw Lincoln lift and move some distance "a chicken house made of poles, pinned together and covered, that weighed at least six hundred pounds, if not more." At another time Lincoln observed three or four men placing sticks under some huge posts to make them more easily lifted and carried, whereupon he shouldered the posts single-handed and deposited them at the place where they were to be used.

When Abraham was still a youth, he began to take on all comers in wrestling matches and soon was so proficient that when he reached the Illinois country at twenty-one years of age, he offered to the prairie strong men plenty of competition for wrestling honors. Bill Needham, champion of Coles County, Illinois, became very angry because Lincoln threw



him so easily. Nearly every boy has heard of Lincoln's victory over Jack Armstrong, the Clary Grove ruffian.

How Lincoln's great strength served him to advantage on one occasion is illustrated by a story he told about an incident which occurred on the Mississippi River. He said that when he was nineteen, still residing in Indiana, he made his first trip upon a flatboat to New Orleans. He was a hired hand merely, and he and a son of the owner, without other assistance, made the trip. The nature of part of the "cargo-load," as it was called, made it necessary for them to linger and trade along the sugar-coast; and one night they were attacked by seven men who intended to kill and rob them. They were hurt some in the melee but succeeded in driving the men from the boat, and then "cut cable," "weighed anchor," and left.

Lincoln's superb physical power was not used to bully his weaker associates, but even as a lad it was his appeal for fair play that did much to make him the recognized leader of the boys in his community. One who knew him well has said: "He was a strong athletic boy, good natured, and ready to out-run, out-jump, and out-wrestle or out-lift anybody in the neighborhood."

## **"Mentally Awake"**

**L**ITTLE emphasis was placed on formal schooling in the wilderness at the time Lincoln was growing up, and he said to a biographer, "There were some schools, so called; but no qualification was ever required of a teacher, beyond '*readin, writin, and cipherin*' to the Rule of Three. If a straggler supposed to understand latin, happened to sojourn in the neighborhood, he was looked upon as a wizzard." Yet Lincoln attended three log cabin schools in Indiana and was taught successively by Andrew Crawford, James Swaney, and Azel W. Dorsey.



Lincoln had what we might call a common school education for the western country in that day and time. Most certainly he was "mentally awake" and his stepmother tells us that "He was diligent for knowledge, wished to know, and if pains and labor would get it he was sure to get it."

With respect to his memory she said, "Abe could easily learn and long remember, and when he did learn anything he learned it well and thoroughly. What he thus learned, he stored away in his memory, which was extremely good."

It is indeed fortunate that Lincoln chose to memorize worthwhile pieces of prose and poetry. The passages which impressed him most he would write down on scraps of paper. Later he obtained an old blank book in which he preserved the pieces which he liked best. A small book called *Scott's Lessons in Elocution* encouraged him to study how to speak in public, and he practiced his recitations standing on a stump with a group of children about him for an audience. His early appreciation of good literature and his training in making speeches indirectly helped prepare him to write and deliver in later years the famous address at Gettysburg.



While his stepmother tells us that "Abe read all the books he could lay his hands on," he was not blind to the important lessons which nature had to teach him. Not far away John J. Audubon was making his famous studies of American bird life which he found in great abundance in southern Indiana. In northern Indiana John Chapman (Johnny Appleseed) was covering the western country with his fruit trees. Everywhere there was a profusion of flowers. The great rivers had a special appeal to Lincoln and he became an expert authority on questions relating to navigation. He was granted a patent later in life for a device to be used on boats in shallow water.

There is no finer example of his mental alertness than his progress in mathematics, after finishing his formal schooling, when most of his figuring was done with charcoal on pieces of wood which served as a slate. First he studied algebra, self taught, then a position as a surveyor was offered to him for which he immediately qualified by conquering higher mathematics; and he states in an autobiographical sketch that he mastered Euclid (plain and spherical trigonometry) after he was a grown man. We may not wonder that one with a mind so well trained could write an address like the Second Inaugural which the *London Times* called "The greatest state paper of the century."



No one has given us a better picture of Lincoln's "mental awakensness" than Bishop Simpson who gave the funeral oration at the time of Lincoln's burial in Springfield, Illinois. He said: "If you ask me on what mental characteristic his greatness rested, I answer, on a quick and ready perception of facts; on memory unusually tenacious and retentive; and on a logical turn of mind, which followed sternly and unwaveringly every link in the chain of thought on every subject he was called to investigate. . . . He gained this power by the close study of geometry, and by a determination to perceive the truth in all its relations and simplicity, and, when found, to utter it."

Every American boy is under lasting obligation to Abraham Lincoln for his ability as a statesman to solve the intricate problems of his day, as well as his guarantee of the preservation of the Union. It is to Abraham Lincoln more than to any other individual that the American boy owes his unlimited opportunities in a free and peaceful country.

### **"Morally Straight"**

**O**VERSHADOWING Lincoln's great strength and keen intellect was a genius for character building which matured into a lofty moral code which he followed throughout life. He lived as a youth in a day when it was not easy to be "morally straight," but he bravely refused to form any injurious habit which would hinder his usefulness.

The stepmother with whom Abraham Lincoln lived from the time he was eleven years old until he became twenty-one has left this statement about his conduct: "He never drank whiskey or other strong drink, was temperate in all things. . . . He never told me a lie in his life, never evaded, never quarrelled. . . . He never swore or used profane language in my presence or in others that I ever remember." She might have added to her testimony the fact that Lincoln never used tobacco in any form, and all of these statements would stand true for his whole life as well as his youth.

Abraham Lincoln's character is not to be judged primarily by the absence of certain harmful habits in his life, but by a positive and purposeful attitude which he revealed. His stepmother has also made



this statement about Abraham's early years: "He was kind to everybody and to everything and always accommodated others if he could." Apparently it became natural for him to do good turns daily and be generally helpful.

As a very small boy Abraham Lincoln seemed to have learned from his own mother important lessons about the question of right and wrong principles. This early teaching had very much to do with the attitude which he finally took on the question of slavery. In writing to a friend in Kentucky in later years he stated that he could not remember the day when he did not think slavery to be wrong. It was the notion which Lincoln had, even as a boy, about the wrongs of slavery that finally caused him to become the emancipator of four million enslaved men. He has become known as the great lover of mankind, a humanitarian with a burning passion that the right might prevail.

Possibly the moral trait that has been more often associated with Abraham Lincoln than any of his many other virtues is his honesty. We have come to know him as "Honest Abe." His reputation for honesty as a youth followed him through all those early years in Illinois when he was struggling with poverty. As a storekeeper, on one occasion he had taken six and a quarter cents too much from one of his customers, and, after the store was closed that evening, he walked several miles to repay the one he had short-changed. On another occasion he weighed some goods in the evening, and in the morning discovered he had placed the wrong weight on the scales. This time he shut up shop and went immediately to deliver the rest of the goods due the customer.

Sometimes we may learn the true character of a man by the way he expresses himself in his correspondence. Abraham Lincoln had a young friend named George Latham, a schoolmate of his own son, Robert Lincoln. George had failed in his college entrance examination, and Mr. Lincoln wrote him this letter of encouragement:

Springfield, Ills. July 22. 1860.

My dear George

I have scarcely felt greater pain in my life than on learning yesterday from Bob's letter, that you had failed to enter Harvard University. And yet there is very little in it, if you will allow no feeling of



*discouragement* to seize, to prey upon you. It is a *certain* truth, that you *can* enter, and graduate in, Harvard University; and having made the attempt, you *must* succeed in it. "*Must*" is the word.

I know not how to aid you, save in the assurance of one of mature age, and much severe experience, that you *can* not fail, if you resolutely determine, that you *will* not . . . .

In your temporary failure there is no evidence that you may not yet be a better scholar, and a more successful man in the great struggle of life, than many others, who have entered college more easily.

Again I say let no feeling of discouragement prey upon you, and in the end you are sure to succeed.

With more than a common interest I subscribe myself

Very truly your friend,

A. Lincoln.

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## Lincoln Poem



The poem entitled "The Bear Hunt," printed on the opposite page, was written by Abraham Lincoln upon his return from a visit to his old Indiana home which he had not seen for fourteen years. The memory of a chase in which he participated when a boy, was recalled and put in verse. The moral in this poem is introduced through a small worthless dog called in pioneer days a "fice."

# The Bear Hunt

BY ABRAHAM LINCOLN

A wild-bear chace, didst never see?  
Then hast thou lived in vain.  
Thy richest bump of glorious glee,  
Lies desert in thy brain.

When first my father settled here,  
'Twas then the frontier line:  
The panther's scream, filled night with fear  
And bears preyed on the swine.

But wo for Bruin's short lived fun,  
When rose the squealing cry;  
Now man and horse, with dog and gun,  
For vengeance, at him fly.

A sound of danger strikes his ear;  
He gives the breeze a snuff:  
Away he bounds, with little fear,  
And seeks the tangled rough.

On press his foes, and reach the ground,  
Where's left his half munched meal;  
The dogs, in circles, scent around,  
And find his fresh made trail.

With instant cry, away they dash,  
And men as fast pursue;  
O'er logs they leap, through water splash,  
And shout the brisk halloo.

Now to elude the eager pack,  
Bear shuns the open ground;  
Th(r)ough matted vines, he shapes his track  
And runs it, round and round.

The tall fleet cur, with deep-mouthed voice,  
Now speeds him, as the wind;  
While half-grown pup, and short-legged fice,  
Are yelping far behind.

And fresh recruits are dropping in  
To join the merry corps:  
With yelp and yell,—a mingled din—  
The woods are in a roar.

And round and round the chace now goes,  
The world's alive with fun;  
Nick Carter's horse, his rider throws,  
And more, Hill drops his gun.

Now sorely pressed, bear glances back,  
And lolls his tired tongue;  
When as, to force him from his track,  
An ambush on him sprung.

Across the glade he sweeps for flight,  
And fully is in view.  
The dogs, new-fired, by the sight,  
Their cry, and speed, renew.

The foremost ones, now reach his rear,  
He turns, they dash away;  
And circling now, the wrathful bear,  
They have him full at bay.

At top of speed, the horse-men come,  
All screaming in a row.  
"Whoop! Take him Tiger. Seize him Drum."  
Bang,—bang—the rifles go.

And furious now, the dogs he tears,  
And crushes in his ire.  
Wheels right and left, and upward rears,  
With eyes of burning fire.

But leaden death is at his heart,  
Vain all the strength he plies.  
And, spouting blood from every part,  
He reels, and sinks, and dies.

And now a dinsome damor rose,  
'Bout who should have his skin;  
Who first draws blood, each hunter knows,  
This prize must always win.

But who did this, and how to trace  
What's true from what's a lie,  
Like lawyers, in a murder case  
They stoutly *argufy*.

Aforesaid fice, of blustering mood,  
Behind, and quite forgot,  
just now emerging from the wood,  
Arrives upon the spot.

With grinning teeth, and up-turned hair—  
Brim full of spunk and wrath,  
He growls, and seizes on dead bear,  
And shakes for life and death.

And swells as if his skin would tear,  
And growls and shakes again;  
And swears, as plain as dog can swear,  
That he has won the skin.

Conceited whelp! we laugh at thee—  
Nor mind, that not a few  
Of pompous, two-legged dogs there be,  
Conceited quite as you.



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